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Their prewar warnings about Iraq now look prescient. Why? Perhaps because they were thinking the way Americans usually do.

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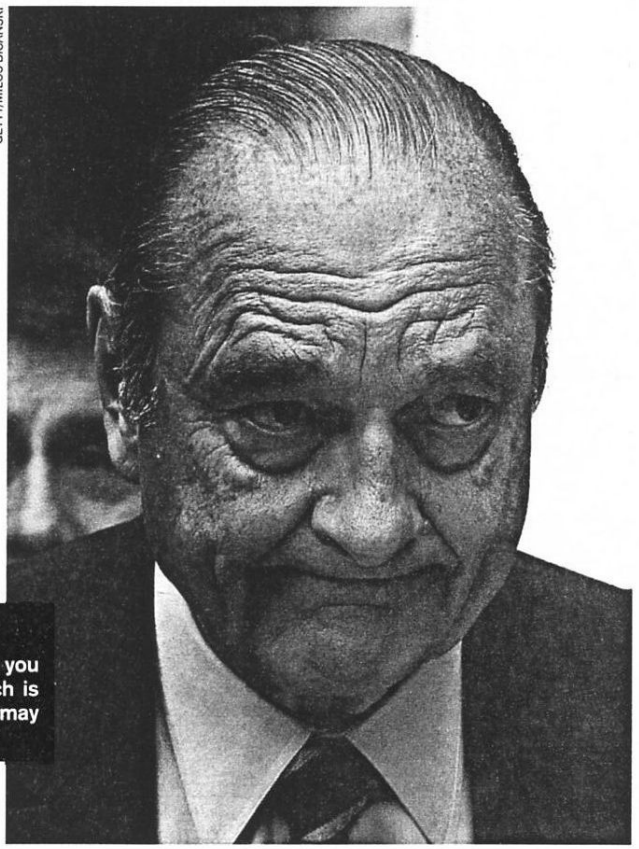
BY PAUL STAROBIN

The French Were Right



GETTY/MILOS BICANSKI

JACQUES CHIRAC:
"Think twice before you do something which is not necessary and may be very dangerous."

JACQUES CHIRAC AND HIS CAMP, SHAPED BY THE ALGERIAN WAR AND THEIR OWN RECENT LESSONS IN FIGHTING TERRORISM, CORRECTLY PREDICTED THE CONSEQUENCES OF INVADING IRAQ.

The French Were Right

Let's just say this at the start, since this is the beginning, not the end, of the discussion about how to grapple with the post-9/11 world (and because it's the grown-up, big-man thing to do): The French were right. Let's say it again: The French—yes, those "cheese-eatin' surrender monkeys," as their detractors in the United States so pungently called them—were right.

"Be careful!" That was the exclamation-point warning French President Jacques René Chirac sent to "my American friends" in a March 16 interview on CNN, just before the Pentagon began its invasion of Iraq. "Think twice before you do something which is not necessary and may be very dangerous," Chirac advised. And this was not some last-minute heads-up, but the culmination of a full-brief argument that the French advanced against the perils of a U.S.-led intervention, pressed over months at the United Nations in New York and at meetings in Paris, Prague, and Washing-

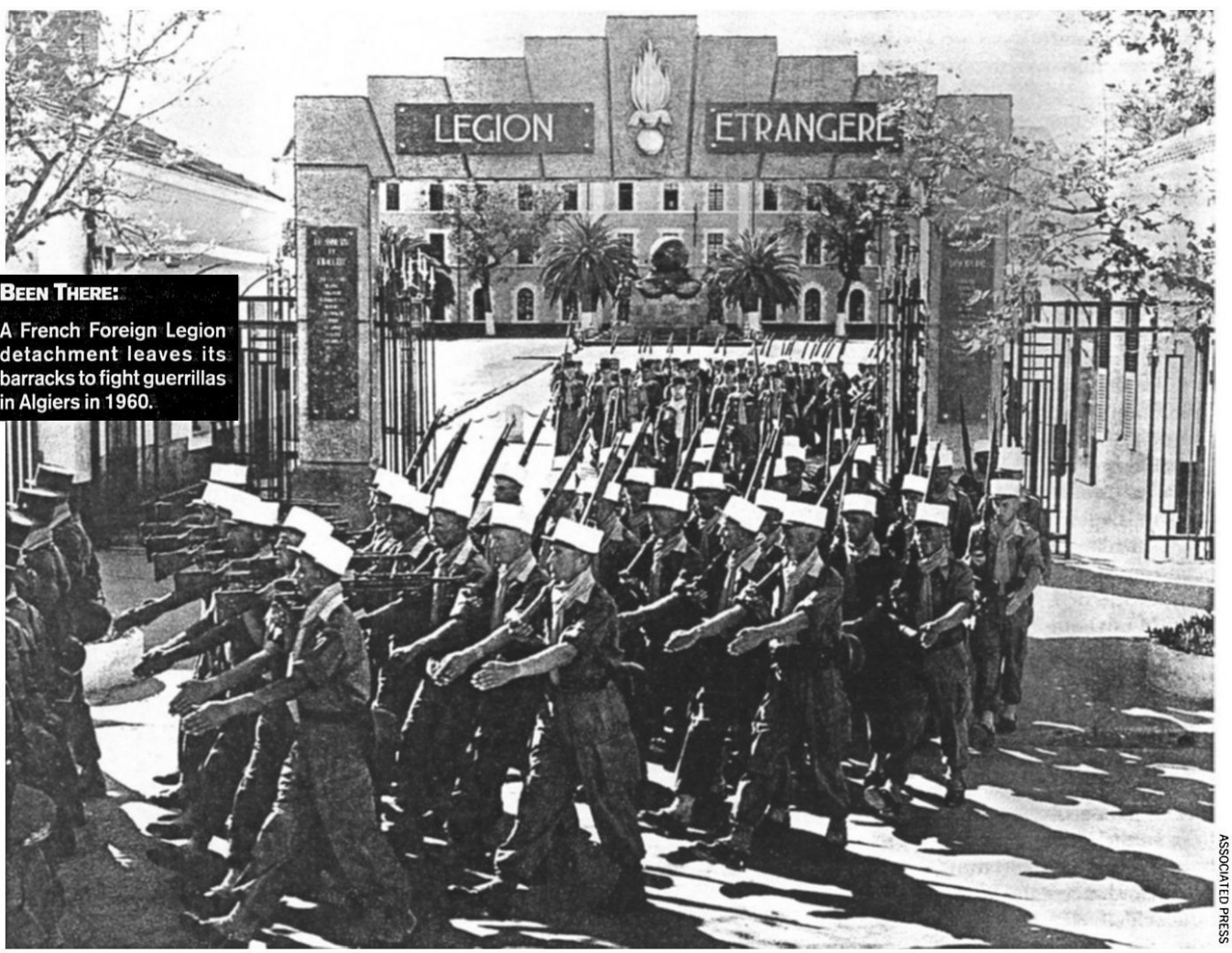
BY PAUL STAROBIN ■

ton. There were, of course, other war critics in Europe and elsewhere, but nobody presented the arguments more insistently or comprehensively than did the French, God bless 'em.

But the Americans, or at least the Bush administration, paid no heed to the French warnings, which were not simply that war was a bad idea, but that an invasion's consequences could be harmful to Western interests and to the larger war on terror. And now the administration is finding itself in an increasingly unhappy situation in Iraq, with its 130,000-strong contingent there the target of a sophisticated and lethal guerrilla campaign waged by foreign Islamic fighters and Saddam Hussein loyalists. Back home, a majority of the American public is opposed to Congress's backing of the president's request for $87 billion for military and reconstruction needs in Iraq and Afghanistan. Meanwhile, the White House strains to explain the failure, so far, to find weapons of mass destruction, whose supposed presence in the country, after all, was a prime rationale for the war. Even avid war proponents concede that the United States is in for "a long, hard slog" in Iraq, as Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld wrote in a recently leaked memo. America, in short, is at risk of getting trapped in a hell of its own making. Leave it to a philosopher on the Seine to anticipate this sort of predicament. The Left Bank existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre called his 1944 play, on the suffering that human beings tend to visit on themselves, *No Exit*.

In blame-game Washington, critics are asking how the administration got into this mess, and why its forecasts of the war's aftermath were so mistaken. But perhaps the most helpful question is not "Why the Administration Was Wrong," but rather, "How the French Managed to Get It Right." To ask how the Bush camp got offtrack is to pose a car-wreck type of question, and all such inquiries tend to be disfigured by partisan, factional enmity. But to ask why the French were right is to put the matter in a more positive, constructive vein. And the question has a ripe urgency, worth pursuing not as a matter of assigning historical bragging rights but as an aid to a necessary rethinking of the Iraq campaign that the administration, albeit in a fitful, truculent mood, has in any event already begun, with its recent plea for help from the United Nations and other countries, France included, and its stepped-up efforts to put more Iraqis in charge of security.

Hold on. Were the French *really* right? After all, Iraq is not a finished matter. What looks like a mess today may yet get sorted out. Most supporters of the war continue to believe it was justified, despite the problems it has caused. Nevertheless, at this juncture, it is plain that the French, and in particular Chirac and his advisers, had a certain ana-



BEEN THERE: A French Foreign Legion detachment leaves its barracks to fight guerrillas in Algiers in 1960.

ASSOCIATED PRESS

lytical purchase on the situation that the Bush administration lacked.

The French made three basic claims—all countered, in varying degrees of intensity, by the administration. The first was that the threat posed by Saddam was not imminent, and that's borne out by all available evidence, not least the latest report by Bush-appointed arms inspector David Kay, in which he stated that no weapons of mass destruction had been found. The second claim was that democracy-building in Iraq was going to be a lengthy, difficult, bloody process—with the Iraqi population very likely to view the Americans as occupiers, not liberators. Quite apart from the spate of attacks on U.S. soldiers by various fanatics, this claim is borne out by polls showing that a majority of Iraqis would like the United States to leave. And third, the French correctly predicted that the Muslim world would perceive a U.S.-led intervention lacking the explicit blessing of the United Nations as illegitimate—and thus would incite even greater anger toward America.

"A war in Iraq could trigger more frustration, bitterness, in the Arab world and beyond, in the Muslim world," Jean-David Levitte, French ambassador to the U.S., warned in remarks on February 7 at the U.S. Institute of Peace in Washington. *Touché.* "Hostility toward America has reached shocking levels," an administration-appointed panel, headed by a former U.S. ambassador to Syria, Edward Djerejian, recently reported on post-invasion attitudes in the Muslim world.

Still seething over the French prewar position on Iraq, administration officials are hardly of a mind to bestow awards on the French for prescience. The Democrats, many of whom supported the war, would have no political gain in citing the unpopular French as role models for their thinking, even if the statements now made by the party's leaders in Congress and its presidential candidates so closely resemble prewar French comments. ("The war was an unnecessary war," retired Gen. Wesley Clark pronounced, à la Chirac, on October 9.)

As for the administration, even Secretary of State Colin Powell, a relative moderate, still gets huffy at the mention of the French. "We were right, they were wrong, and I am here," a Powell aide, in an interview with *The New York Times,* quoted his boss as saying at a September meeting with Iraqi officials in Baghdad.

U.S. media presentations of the French arguments have been on a similar plane. The "cheese-eatin' " tag (would that be Brie or Roquefort?) derives from an eight-year-old episode of the animated television show *The Simpsons,* in which a reluctant teacher of French greets his elementary-school charges with the rousing salutation "*Bonjour,* ye cheese-eatin' surrender monkeys!" It fell to a pop-culturally informed conservative polemicist, *National Review* scribe Jonah Goldberg, to revive and popularize the insult in the prewar name-calling. The *New York Post* is still calling the French "weasels."

From the tenor of the discussion, in Washington and the hinterlands, you might think that the Elysée Palace opposes by reflex whatever the White House says. But the French are only selectively stubborn. France was the only country, other than the United States, to conduct air strikes against the Taliban in Afghanistan, with their Mirage jets and Super Etenard fighters hitting more than 30 targets during Operation Anaconda in March 2002. The French enthusiastically backed the Afghanistan war, breaking with Washington only on the Iraq question.

No more persuasive is the widely voiced (in the U.S.) argument that the French were defending wide-reaching and profitable commercial relationships with Saddam's regime. The truth is that France enjoyed minor economic ties with Saddam. Under the United Nations' now-defunct Oil for Food program with Saddam's Iraq, the French were only the 13th-largest participant. The U.S. under that program bought more than 50 percent of Iraq's total oil exports, the French 8 percent.

So the answer to the question of why the French were right has to begin with an admission that their intransigence cannot be dismissed as a knee-jerk impulse or narrowly self-interested plank. *Au contraire.* What divided the two longtime allies—each of which has been a beacon for liberal Western values over the past two centuries—was a deep analytical chasm. An understanding of how the French got to the place they got to and stubbornly clung to, even as relations with Washington badly deteriorated, requires a probe of the substance and roots of the French position.

BETTMANN/CORBIS

ALGIERS, 1956: In the face of mounting terrorism, French troops began random searches of Algerians.

That may not sound like much fun. Even though they deny it, the French are already gloating that their much-maligned prewar forecast has proved to be on target. But here's the good news—and it really is very good news. One big reason the French were right is that they were thinking along the lines that Americans are generally apt to think—that is, in a cautious, pragmatic way, informed by their own particular trial-and-error experience, in this case as an occupier forced out of Algeria and as a front-line battler, long before 9/11, against global Islamic terrorist groups.

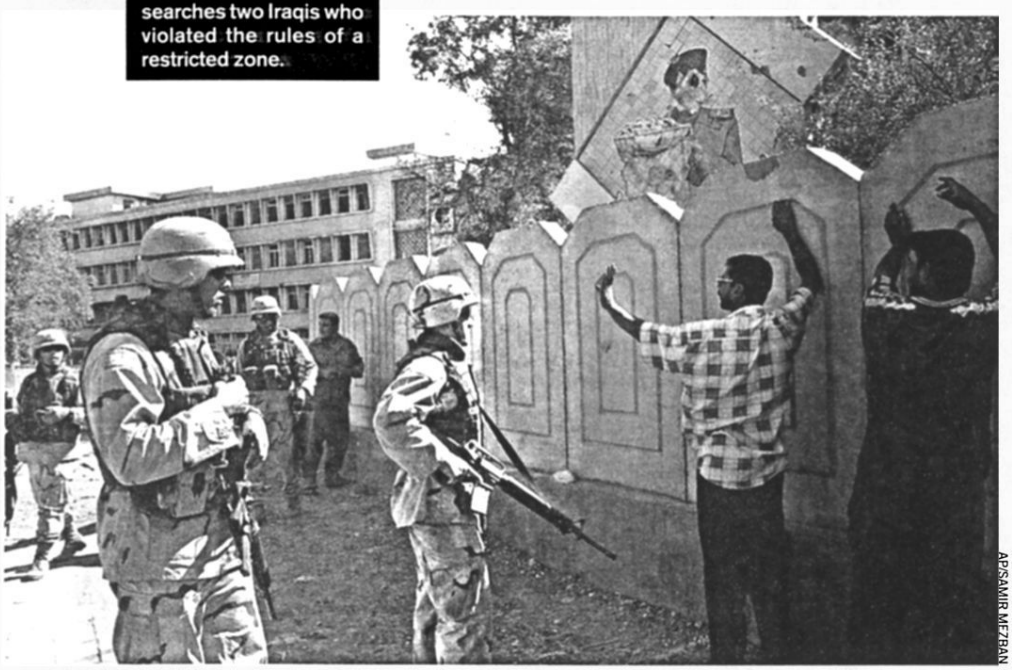
The Bush administration, by contrast, approached Iraq

the way the French are often thought to approach large world problems—with a grandiose sweep of the theoretical hand, a tack exemplified by the big-ideas neoconservative crowd, whose own thinking, ironically, draws on European political philosophy. So as the administration rethinks Iraq, the way back to a sound position may lie at home, in the great but neglected tradition of American Pragmatism. And then everyone can forget about the French.

The Prism: Algeria

A pragmatic approach starts with memory—with the ability to distill lessons from analogous past experiences. That can be a tricky business. American critics of the war, particularly those on the left, cited Vietnam as a cautionary parallel. Perhaps that is apt, since the Vietnam conflict did involve a clash of civilizations, and the U.S. never fully understood the alien social and political milieu in which its forces were operating.

Baghdad, 2003: A U.S. Army patrol searches two Iraqis who violated the rules of a restricted zone.



AP/SAMIR MEZRAN

But Vietnam is not a Muslim or Middle Eastern country, and it was a Cold War theater, in which both the Soviet Union and China assisted anti-U.S. guerrilla bands. There is only one Western country with an intimate, bloody, and recent experience of what it is like to be an occupying power in an Arab land, facing an Islamic insurgency. That country is France, which granted independence to Algeria in 1963 after failing to subdue an eight-year-long rebellion by cold-blooded assassins who didn't blanch at bombing Algiers nightclubs frequented by French teenagers.

The memory remains etched into the French political consciousness. No event since the Second World War is a heavier or more painful burden for France than is the Algerian uprising. Algeria, on the southern shore of the Mediterranean Sea, had a much closer connection to France than Vietnam ever did to the United States. During the 132 years of French rule, starting in the 1830s, Algeria was, in legal, constitutional terms, an annexed section of France, not a colony. The Algerian uprising, with its demand for independence, destroyed the fourth French Republic by precipitating a coup attempt by the French military against civilian political leaders viewed as feckless. It also established itself as the central prism through which the French political elite came to view the Muslim world in general and the forces of Arab nationalism and Islamic militancy in particular.

And even more than that, Algeria forced France to reexamine its political, economic, and cultural relations with the entire non-Western portion of humanity. Algeria contained the lesson of a classic "failure," the British historian Alistair Horne wrote in *A Savage War of Peace,* his definitive 1977 account of the conflict; he called it "the failure either to meet, or even comprehend, the aspirations of the Third World."

The Islamic world, as the most immediately problematic for the French, received France's priority attention. In the United States, it was only with 9/11 that beginning a dialogue with the Muslim community came to seem urgent, but the French, because of Algeria, had embarked on this road decades before. "The U.S. is still a bit virginal in its relationship with the Islamic part of the world," notes Simon Serfaty, a Frenchman born 60 years ago in colonial Morocco, who is an analyst at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington. "The French know this part of the world better."

The Algerian uprising certainly made a powerful impression on a young man destined for France's highest political office: Jacques Chirac. Conscripted in 1956, at the age of 23, to serve as an officer in the French army, Chirac commanded a platoon in an isolated mountainous region of Algeria. The mission was to keep order. But order proved impossible to keep, with the local population protective of the *fellaghas*, the armed resistance fighters from the *Fronte de Liberation Nationale* (FLN). Chirac himself was not wounded in engagements with the guerrillas, but some of his men were, and some were killed. In a speech to the French Military Academy in 1996, he called his time there the most important formative experience of his life.

According to an old friend and adviser, Algeria principally taught Chirac that occupation, even under the best of intentions, is impossible when popular sentiments have turned against the occupier: "His experience is that despite all the goodwill, when you are an occupier, when you are seen [by the local people] as an occupier, the people will want you to get out." And if Chirac was convinced of anything, according to this source, it was that the Americans would ultimately be viewed not as liberators in Iraq but as occupiers. He foresaw a kind of re-enactment of the Algerian tragedy, the source adds, a "vicious circle" in which increasingly violent acts against the occupier are met with an increasingly harsh response—a cycle that inevitably sours local people against the occupation.

AP/ANWAR ABBAS

PAKISTAN, 2002:
A suicide bus bombing, linked to Al Qaeda, killed 11 French naval engineers in Karachi.

As the French side tells it, this perspective was at the heart of a disagreement between Chirac and Bush at a private talk late last November in Prague, where U.S. and European leaders were gathered to discuss enlarging NATO. (Although the pair talked on the telephone, this was their main exchange before the war started six months later.) According to a senior French official who reviewed a French handwritten transcript of the meeting, Chirac talked not about the risks of the major combat phase of a military campaign, which the French expected to go quickly, but about the perils of the postwar phase, in particular the dangers of underestimating the force of Arab nationalism and the prevalence of violence in a country that had never known democracy. According to the French source, Bush replied that he expected postwar armed resistance from elements connected to Saddam's Baathist regime—but thought it unlikely that the population as a whole would come to see the U.S. as occupiers. And Chirac, according to the source, told Bush that history would decide who was right. The White House recently declined to comment on the meeting.

Seven months after Saddam's toppling, the struggle for the "hearts and minds" of the Iraqi people goes on. But a survey of Iraqi public opinion, done in August for the American Enterprise Institute by pollster John Zogby, tends to confirm Chirac's instinct. Yes, the poll found that on the whole, Iraqis were very glad to be rid of Saddam; 70 percent said they expected Iraq to be "much better" or "somewhat better" in five years. That was the finding the administration and AEI highlighted. But asked whether America and Britain should help make sure a representative government is set up in Iraq or just let Iraqis work this out themselves, 60 percent responded "Iraqis alone." Asked whether the U.S. over the next five years would help or hurt Iraq, 36 percent said "help" and 50 percent said "hurt." In an interview on the poll's results, Zogby said: "The results are not good, from the perspective of the Bush administration. Something is not working, and there is plenty of polling evidence to show that something is not working." He continued: "The Americans misread the situation. They honestly thought the Iraqis were going to be welcoming them."

Traumatic experiences can be distorting, but the French fixation on Algeria, if that's what it is, seems appropriate. The uprising was not just a defeat for an aging, corrupt imperial power. It was also an awakening experience for such coming-of-age insurgents as Yasir Arafat and a forerunner of Islamic militants' decision to use terror to achieve broad political objectives. The conflict introduced the French to the same kind of deadly enemy that U.S. forces now find themselves battling in the streets of Baghdad. Better late than never, the Pentagon in September arranged for senior Special Forces officers a screening of *The Battle of Algiers,* the 1966 film showing how crack French paratroopers rolled up terrorist cells in the Algerian capital, in one of France's few clear-cut victories in that war. The message is twofold. On the one hand, the paratroopers forced the FLN to abandon the campaign in the capital. But the insurgency itself was not extinguished—and eventually, it was the unremitting toll of French casualties and a public backlash in France against the army's harsh tactics against the Algerian population that caused the French to cut and run.

If an Iraqi version of the Algerian drama were to continue playing out, then the final act would be an abrupt, poorly planned pullout by a politically pressured Washington. Noting the growing domestic outcry over U.S. casualties in Iraq—which, at 379 killed as of November 4, are quite small according to the historical standards of armed conflict—the French believe this may well happen, despite Bush's vow to stay the course until Iraq is stable and democratic. And the result, Paris worries, would be a giant mess on Europe's doorstep. At this stage, "the worst-case scenario for us would be for [the U.S.] to leave," Levitte said in a recent interview at his Georgetown quarters. "If you want to build democracy in Iraq, you must be prepared to pay a price."

From Appeasement to Afghanistan

So the French are not virgins when it comes to occupations. Nor are they virgins when it comes to countering international terrorism. They left Algeria feeling humiliated and somewhat cowed. In their first stab at constructing a policy to deal with the strange new threat of Islamic terrorism, the French adopted a policy of appeasement—an approach that included tacit permission for globally oriented terrorist groups to use French soil as a base, so long as the groups did not make France itself a target. Not surprisingly, France became a haven for international terrorists. But several decades later, Paris possessed counter-terrorism capabilities, oriented toward preventing attacks, second to none in the Western world in effectiveness. And French Mirages were dropping bombs on Afghanistan.

Behind this turnaround is a story of how the French learned what works in the struggle against Islamic terrorism. Along with Algeria, this learning experience powerfully shaped the French perspective on the post-9/11 world, and it helps explain why the French felt so strongly that Iraq was a secondary priority in the struggle against terrorism.

One of the few in Washington who has done a careful parsing of the French experience in counter-terrorism is an unassuming former Rand analyst, Jeremy Shapiro, who these days hangs his hat at the Brookings Institution as a research associate in the think tank's center on the United States and France. A 1989 Harvard graduate who's fluent in French, Shapiro has cultivated contacts among counter-terrorist experts at law enforcement agencies in both Paris and Washington. For obscure policy journals, he's been writing such pieces as "The U.S. Can Learn From the French in the War Against Terrorism."

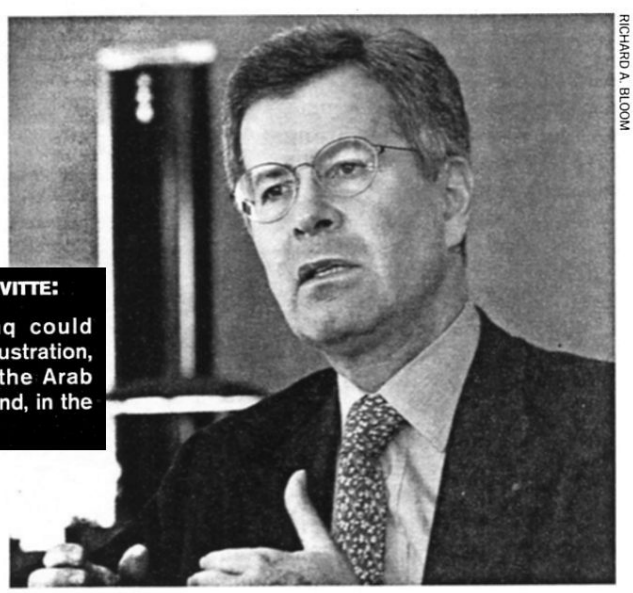
In an interview at his cramped Brookings quarters, Shapiro right away warmed to the topic. "The French were among the first to note that terrorism was a global movement," he said. But before they came to this realization, they floundered. In the 1980s, a wave of bombings struck Paris targets, including department stores and subways. Not only were the French unable to prevent these attacks, they were also clueless about the perpetrators and motives. At first they thought that domestic neo-Nazi militants were behind an assault on a synagogue in a wealthy section of Paris. Only belatedly did they realize that responsibility lay with terrorists from the Middle East.

The French had descended to this low point through their adoption of what Shapiro calls the "sanctuary doctrine"—a morally repugnant effort to isolate France from international terrorism by taking a neutral stance toward global terrorist groups. The idea was to give the terrorists no reason to attack France. (Better they hit someone else.)

It didn't work. Other countries actively battling terrorism, such as Spain and Israel, were understandably outraged that France was sheltering their enemies. Some splinter terrorist bands failed to recognize France as a "sanctuary" and targeted French interests anyway. And amid the Paris attacks, the French public demanded a get-tough approach.

As a result, French counter-terrorism policy evolved to its current emphasis on suppression and prevention. The key to this policy is what Shapiro calls the "Alan Greenspan" choice. In effect, France decided to de-politicize the anti-terrorism battle. "The French treat terrorism like we treat central banking—as too serious to be left to the politicians," Shapiro says. At the heart of the French system is a group of Paris-based magistrates with sweeping investigative powers of the sort that a John Ashcroft would die for. Through the expertise accumulated over numerous investigations, the magistrates managed to burrow deeply into the roots of global Islamic terrorist networks and thus gain information on attacks even as they were being plotted.

The results are impressive—and have helped protect not just the French but Americans, too. Shapiro's textbook example is the apprehension of terrorist Ahmed Ressam, who was arrested at the U.S.-Canadian border in December 1999 with a trunk full of explosives he planned to use to attack Los Angeles International Airport. Even though he had few connections to France, French anti-terrorism officials had been tracking Ressam for more than three years and had repeatedly warned Canadian authorities of his plans to attack North American targets. The French provided the FBI with a full dossier on Ressam, helped U.S. officials identify his associates, and sent an expert to testify at Ressam's trial, at which he was convicted.



RICHARD A. BLOOM

Jean-David Levitte: "A war in Iraq could trigger more frustration, bitterness, in the Arab world and beyond, in the Muslim world."

In this context, the French response to 9/11 represented a final repudiation of the sanctuary doctrine. The notion that France could somehow hide from terrorism was replaced by a newfound sense of solidarity, all the more startling given the anti-Americanism that had long been a staple of French politics. "We Are All Americans"—"*Nous*

AP/B.K. BANGASH

KABUL PARTNERS:
The French have consistently supported the U.S. war in Afghanistan with troops and airplanes.

Sommes Tous Américains"—the front page of *Le Monde* declared on September 13, 2001. And with Levitte at the helm of the U.N. Security Council (his assignment before he took up residence in Washington as the French ambassador), that body, for the first time in its history, declared that an act of terrorism was equivalent to an act of war. It was with that legal predicate that France joined the U.S. in the campaign to topple the Taliban.

IRAQ: A QUESTION OF LEGITIMACY

Unity, of course, proved short-lived, as the real possibility of a war in Iraq came into focus in the fall of 2002. France's clear priority was a continued focus on Al Qaeda and related networks—and the pursuit of what they viewed as unfinished business in the campaign against Taliban and other Islamic fighters regrouping in Afghanistan and Pakistan. French citizens were themselves directly under attack—a Qaeda bomb had killed 11 French engineers at the Sheraton Hotel in Karachi. "This is the main threat," Levitte said in a briefing at the European Institute, a Washington think tank, on January 29. Based on its own knowledge of Al Qaeda and related Islamic networks, the French saw nothing to connect Saddam's regime with Osama bin Laden and company. In December 2002, French authorities arrested a dozen North African Arabs who had links to Al Qaeda and were plotting to attack targets in Paris. French authorities suspected links between Al Qaeda and Chechen rebels, but not between Al Qaeda and Baghdad, French officials stated publicly at that time.

Still, the French did not rule out the use of force in Iraq. Rather, French opposition to a U.S.-initiated strike on Iraq centered on the question of legitimacy. On whose authority, they asked, could military force justifiably be used? This is an old tug-of-war between the two countries, going back to the early days of the Cold War, but Iraq elevated this disagreement to a new level of antagonism. The French reject the idea of American Exceptionalism—a venerable fixture of the U.S. political psyche and staple of presidential speeches. American Exceptionalism is the notion that the United States has a unique crusader role to play in advancing freedom in the world, and can accomplish this mission not only because of its immense military power but also because of the compelling example it has set in creating a dynamic, democratic society at home.

The French, who after their anti-monarchical revolution in the 18th century staked a similar claim to a liberal, torch-bearing Exceptionalism, don't accept any of this. They insist that legitimacy, particularly with respect to the use of force, resides exclusively in the institutions of the "international community," namely the U.N. Security Council. "I am totally against unilateralism in the modern world," Chirac told *The New York Times* in a September 8, 2002, interview.

To a grated-on U.S. ear, this may sound like nothing more than the usual French rant against the United States as the world's *hyperpuissance,* or hyperpower. And, of course, the French, in arguing for a decisive role for the U.N. Security Council, are seeking to preserve an important role for themselves as one of the five permanent, veto-wielding members of that body. Nonetheless, it is also possible to believe that the French have a better practical fix on how the world sees America—and multilateral institutions such as the U.N.—than the Americans themselves have. American Exceptionalism works only when foreigners buy into it. If they don't, then the U.S. insistence on having its way truly does amount to bullying. And in this regard, world public opinion, loudly and clearly, seems to be saying, "I'll take the U.N." For example, in Iraq itself, while a majority of Iraqis in Zogby's recent poll said they thought the U.S. would "hurt," not "help," Iraq over the next five years, the same question about the U.N. drew an opposite response, with 50 percent saying it would "help" Iraq and just 19 percent saying "hurt."

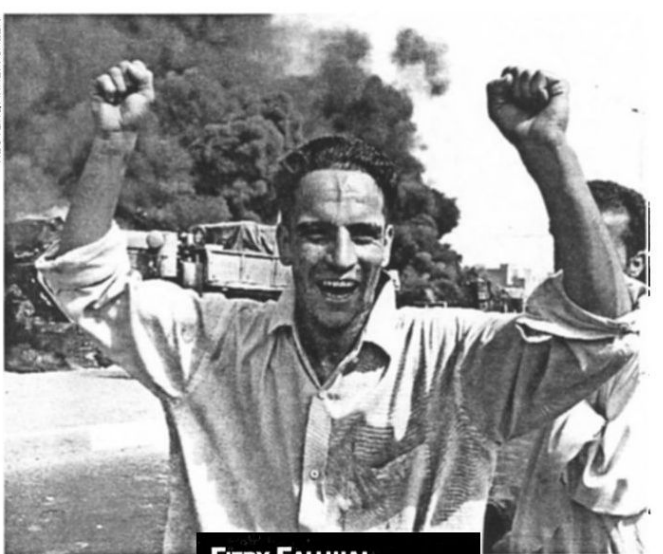
Polling in the broader Muslim world underscores what, to advocates of American Exceptionalism, can only seem contradictory. On the one hand, the U.S. intervention in Iraq significantly inflamed Muslim opinion. A June survey by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press found that anti-American attitudes had spread from the Middle East to Islamic countries such as Indonesia, where favorable ratings for the U.S. had plunged from 61 percent to 15 percent over the course of 12 months. The survey also found that majorities in leading Muslim countries were worried about the U.S. as a potential military threat. Yet the Pew team also found that large majorities in most Islamic countries aspired to Western-style democracy. The Muslim world seems to like the product the U.S. is selling—but not

the salesman. They'd prefer to get the product from another store, and they seem to think the U.N. is that store.

All of which, of course, is what the French have been arguing—at a higher decibel level than anyone else. "The French sometimes say out loud what others are thinking," says Charles William Maynes, president of the Eurasia Foundation in Washington. And this has long driven Washington nuts. Maynes remembers from his days as a Foreign Service officer for the State Department in the 1960s that it was "very difficult to get a rational discussion" within the department about France or India. "I decided that that was because they were democratic countries that had an independent policy and their own view of the world."

Pragmatism, Anyone?

Let's review. The French got it right in Iraq for three basic reasons. First, the French, by virtue of their own experience, had the best of all prisms with which to view the Iraq showdown: Algeria. Second, the French, because of the improvements they had made in their counter-terrorism efforts, were in a position to make their own independent determination of the threat posed by Al Qaeda and related groups versus the threat posed by Saddam's regime. And third, the French possessed good antennae; they had a clear reading of world, and in particular Muslim, public opinion on whether a U.S.-led intervention would be viewed as legitimate. They were better listeners than the Americans were.



REUTERS/AKREM SALEH

Fiery Falluja: An Iraqi celebrates after a U.S. ammunition truck was hit by a guerrilla's rocket-propelled grenade.

In its exasperation with the French, Washington says it is Paris that has become lost in languid abstractions. "It's easy to toss out nice theories about sovereignty, and occupation, and liberation, and all that," Colin Powell complained to reporters on his plane last month after a round of inconclusive talks with the French on an expanded U.N. role in Iraq.

But he's picking on the French for the wrong reason. The Bush camp had run up against Jacques Chirac—a stubborn 70-year-old man. Not even his friends regard him as a conceptual thinker or grand strategist. He's prone not to airy theorizing but to condescension. On the Iraq matter, he revealed his sense of superiority over Bush, a man 14 years his junior who entered the White House without a track record in foreign affairs. (Chirac has a higher estimation of Bush's father, a multilateralist who fought in World War II and headed the CIA before becoming president.) That final "Be careful!" warning was preceded by a vintage—which is to say, patronizing—Chirac pronouncement: "Personally, I have some experience of international political life."

It's very hard to know what to do about something if you haven't been there before. That's when the temptation to adopt a guiding theoretical framework to make sense of an unfamiliar and threatening landscape can become seductive. It may be too early for a conclusive verdict on the biggest of the big ideas that the neocons around Bush have offered—the idea that a regime change in Iraq can spur a democratic transformation of the authoritarian political culture of the entire Arab Middle East. But that idea most certainly belongs in the category of untested hypothesis.

The neocons are not experts on the Middle East. One of their prime intellectual influences is an abstruse political philosopher, Leo Strauss, a Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany whose students at the University of Chicago included Paul Wolfowitz, now serving as Bush's deputy secretary of Defense and the administration's leading proponent of using Iraq as a laboratory for democratic nation building in the region. Straussians tend to believe in the ability of intellectual elites—modern-day philosopher-kings—to discern truths unavailable to lesser minds. "It's a European style of getting the peasants to do what 'we' say," said James Pinkerton, a critic of the Iraq intervention who worked in the Bush I White House.

Even if America can't tap a particular memory to deal with the post-9/11 world, it does have available to it that old and poignant tradition of American pragmatism. And it is a poignant tradition. Modern American Pragmatism, as the American critic Louis Menand tells the story in his Pulitzer-Prize winning book, *The Metaphysical Club*, was hatched after the Civil War as a kind of antidote to overly ideological and moralistic views of the world. The pragmatists came to their new lights as a result of their own hard, tragic experiences. Of Oliver Wendell Holmes, one of the movement's charter thinkers, Menand writes: "He had gone off to fight because of his moral beliefs, which he held with singular fervor. The war did more than make him lose those beliefs. It made him lose his belief in beliefs. It impressed on his mind, in the most graphic and indelible way, a certain idea about the limits of ideas."

There is a danger in this line of thinking—the risk that an excess of pragmatism will spill over into cynicism and a paralyzing pessimism. But there's danger, too, in an excess of theory, spilling over into recklessness. "The limits of ideas"—now *there's* an intriguing concept. How un-what-we-think-of-as-French. How ripe for America to re-explore. ■

National Journal intern Nicolas Parasie contributed research to this story. The author can be reached at pstarobin@nationaljournal.com.

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National Journal: French were right about Iraq

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WASHINGTON (AP) - The French were right about Iraq, partly because they were thinking cautiously and pragmatically because of their long battle against Islamic terrorist groups and their experience as an occupier forced out of Algeria, the National Journal said in its latest edition.

Before the war in Iraq, France made three basic claims: that the threat posed by Saddam Hussein was not imminent; that democracy-building was going to be a lengthy, difficult and bloody process; and that the Muslim world would perceive as illegitimate a U.S.-led intervention that lacked the blessing of the United Nations.

The U.S. experience in Iraq suggests the French were on to something, said the magazine, a nonpartisan weekly aimed at people with a professional interest in politics, policy and government.

The article on France is this week's cover story entitled "The French Were Right."

"Let's just say this at the start, since this is the beginning, not the end of the discussion about how to grapple with a post 9/11 world and because it's the grown-up big-man thing to do: the French were right," the National Journal said.

"Let's say it again: The French -- yes those 'cheese eatin' surrender monkeys' as their detractors in the United States so pungently called them, were right."

The magazine said President Jacques Chirac gave an exclamation point warning to "my American friends' in a March 16 interview on CNN just before the United States invaded Iraq.

"Think twice before you do something which is not necessary and which may be very dangerous" Chirac advised.

French Defense Minister Michele Alliot-Marie said Tuesday that she was glad to see the publication take France's warnings into account.

"Today, our expertise in this matter is being taken into consideration," she told the France-Inter radio station.

The National Journal said there were other war critics in Europe and elsewhere "but nobody presented the argument more insistently or comprehensively than did the French, God bless 'em."

But the Americans -- or at least the Bush administration -- paid no heed to the French warnings, the article said.

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